



Women's 'Quest of Self' leading to 'Spiritual Empowerment' in *The Escapist* of Manoj Das

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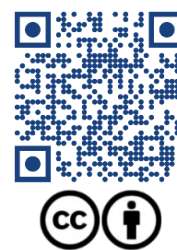
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Abstract— *The Escapist* is the last English novel written by Manoj Das a bilingual writer of Odisha. The novel records the life journey of the protagonist Padmalochan Pramanik who accidentally is compelled to play as a swami. Ranjita Devi the wife of Jayant Thakore, a contractor, mistook him a swami and Padmalochan decides to play along. Living at her house he meets her daughter Sushobhana (Sushie). In the novel the character of Sushie though appears fragile but she displays a spiritual strength that mesmerises the protagonist and leads him to the path of true salvation. Thus she appears more strong character than the protagonist himself. Another strong female character of the novel is of Ranjita Devi. But contrary to Sushie's inner strength she is shown outwardly powerful. Both the female characters leave a lasting impression.



Keywords— Woman, quest, power, self, society, tradition, spirituality

I. INTRODUCTION

Individual's quest for self and desire of empowerment has been the most favoured activity of human being since ages. The power of some led to the subjugation of the weak. The struggle for controlling hold on ones' self has been one of the most recurrent desires of human beings. Yet for centuries, a large part of society has been devoid of their rights. The condition of women was much critical in this sense. They were often confined to the roles that were decided by patriarchal social and economic structures. This extensive historical marginalization of women has given rise to a global and continuous movement demanding their rights. They made the quest for their self and pursued the object of empowerment. Their quest for self is a well-grounded internal journey that leads to their conscious effort to claim personal autonomy. It also establishes their identity independent of relational roles given by patriarchal society and helps to develop self-worth.

'Quest for self' and 'empowerment' are two different terms that has been used for the study. The term 'quest for self' have different connotation according to the

situations. In religious context it is related to spirituality. In Hindu religious law text, *Manusmriti*, it was defined -

अध्यात्मरतिरासीनो निरपेक्षो निरामिषः ।

आत्मनैव सहायेन सुखार्थं विचरेदिह ॥

adhyātmaratirāsīno nirapekṣo nirāmiṣaḥ |
ātmanaiḥ sahāyena sukhārthī vicarediḥa ||(vesre 49)

"Taking delight in what pertains to the self, he (one) should remain seated without longing or sensual attachments. With himself (one's self) as his (one's) only companion, he(one) should walkabout here, seeking felicity." (Manu,verse 49) In Dharmashastra, the quest for self 'emphasizes the journey of understanding and discovering one's true identity and purpose, which is vital in spiritual practice. Historically in India, this quest serves as a foundational theme for personal spiritual exploration, essential for moving beyond individualism and achieving a sense of universal oneness. This pursuit highlights the importance of introspection and self-discovery in the broader context of spiritual growth.' (wisdomlib) The Quest for self in Hinduism involves a journey aimed at understanding one's true identity and purpose, highlighting the importance of self-discovery within the framework of

spiritual practices. (wisdomlib) While Paula Ripple Comin an author of religious works wrote, "inner process of searching for meaning can be the source of life's richest and most refined insights. It is the way in which hitherto hidden meaning surfaces, where sadness and turmoil give way to peace and understanding (Comin 12) In general "the quest for the self is a literary and philosophical theme that explores the individual's journey towards self-discovery, identity, and personal fulfilment." (fiveable)

The second term of study is 'empowerment'. Empowerment is also used in different contexts by different organizations. The root of the term empowerment is the idea of 'power' and power itself involves many meanings. 'Power over' deal with an either/or relationship of domination/subordination. 'Power to' relates to having decision-making authority to solve problems and creating and enabling. 'Power within' refers to self-confidence, self-awareness and assertiveness. It relates to how can individuals can recognise through analysing their experience how power operates in their lives, and gain the confidence to act to influence and change this. (Williams et al,)

The term is applied in the field of education, literature, social work, psychology. Due to its widespread usage there are varieties of understanding of the term. According to Cambridge dictionary it is, 'the process of gaining freedom and power to do what you want or to control what happens to you.'(Cambridge) While in Merriam Webster dictionary it is defined as 'the act or action of empowering someone or something: the granting of the power, right, or authority to perform various acts or duties' or 'the state of being empowered to do something: the power, right, or authority to do something' (Merriam-Webster.) In UN booklet on empowerment Maris Kord viewed, "Empowerment means enabling someone to become all and everything he or she was meant to be. It means helping an individual develop self-worth, self-confidence, self-reliance and independence in such a way as to live meaningfully and peacefully." (Maris Korb) While Claudia LaRue remarked, "For me, being empowered means knowing and trusting that you are in full control of your own destiny. Empowerment implies freedom to choose without fear."

Women empowerment is a veritable, external achievement of gaining equal access and to control over political, economic, and social resources, and thus acquiring right to make life-determining decisions. Women have been tirelessly challenging restrictive norms to secure a voice of their own both in the private and public life. Their combined quest for internal selfhood and external empowerment constitutes a revolutionary yet

vital, and ongoing evolution. Their quest redefines not only individual lives but societal progress globally.

Women's quest for self and demand of empowerment is historically incessant. It is a two-part journey that blends the internal pursuit of a self with the external struggle for social, political, and economic power, referred as 'empowerment'. The Early part deals with confronting the age's long cultural conditioning of some predefined roles and relationship that were decided for women. While the second part deals with the destruction of patriarchal structure that restrict them from opportunities equal to men. This quest is an evolving effort that demands self-determination and the attainment of full rights. It is also a psychological quest that seeks identity beyond domestic affair in different direction either socially, economically or spiritually. The liberated self can make strategic life choices previously denied to her. She can embrace self-worth and can chose goals independent of gendered expectations. This shift from dependent being to autonomous one is the foundation of self-quest and empowerment. The quest for self and empowerment is an ongoing, dynamic process that requires persistent effort so that it can dismantle corporal barriers. The journey demands continuously a world where she is free not only to participate equally but to define her fully realized self in her own way.

Manoj Das, an eminent bilingual writer, who is renowned for blending mysticism with socio-political aspects in a satirical way. He displays profound psychological insight in his fiction. Besides his works in Odia vernacular he produced three English novels named *Cyclones*, *A Tiger at Twilight*, and *The Escapist*. In his works he seldom engages in overt, conventional feminist discourse. Instead, they depict the women's quest for self and empowerment through a lens of spiritual destiny, inner integrity, and moral fortitude amidst the chaotic and often farcical ego-dramas of the male characters. In creative world of Das, empowerment is not merely about achieving external social or political status, but about the profound realization of the true, unattached self. The female figures frequently serve as the moral and spiritual base for the narrative. Many of his male protagonists are confused or ego-driven who perpetually chasing illusions whether political, material, or social. Contrary to male counterpart Das's women characters possess a remarkable capacity for inner silence, firm conviction, and emotional maturity. They inherit stability that allows them to transcend the egoistic turmoil that dominates the men's lives.

The quest for self and empowerment of women in Manoj Das's novel "The Escapist" is intricately woven through the spiritual and philosophical journey of the

protagonist, Padmalochan. The novel primarily explores themes of self-realization, inner awakening, and societal illusions, yet it also subtly highlights the role of women who act as catalysts and are embodiments of spiritual wisdom. In the novel Sushobhana (Sushie) play a crucial role in Padmananda's journey. The central narrative tracks the male protagonist Padmalochan Pramanik's journey into the deceptive world of self-proclaimed swami. He in search for livelihood reaches at the house of Jayant Thakore where in a dramatic way he is assumed as a holy man by Thakore's wife Ranjita Devi. Here he meets Ranjita Devi's daughter in law Sushobhana referred as Sushie. As the story progresses, he feels enchanted towards her physically and spiritually but always reduced to the feeling of inferiority to her. He accepts, "Time and again I found myself getting identified with the captive leopard after my talk with Sushie. The irony was, such moments of suffocation were followed by the thrill for a few minutes when Sushie and I would talk in subdued voices." (88)

Unlike Padmalochan or Swami Padmananda the character of Sushie stands out as a formidable, self-aware individual. She is more mature and formidable consistently standing strong in her decisions and understanding the reality of her situation. Her quiet self-possession and refusal to be swept away by Padmalochan's fantasies underscore a form of self-worth that is entirely internal and not dependent on the male gaze or action. Padmalochan dreaming about his visit in Himalaya says-

"But Sushie," I said getting over my hesitation through some effort, "I also saw you there! You had become one with the snow and bliss of some tranquil valley unknown to geography." (124)

"Memory of the previous life diluted with some fanciful thoughts of this life," said Sushie without the least touch of emotion. (124)

When Padmalochan proposes his ideas on keeping sadhna in Himalaya, Sushie a real intellectual began to laugh. Before her Padmalochan feels himself quite petty,

"I felt snubbed and realised the utter pointlessness of my reverie, but it took me to get over my wakeful trance – or to descend from it- to the matter-of-fact world." (126)

This form of empowerment is achieved through detached action and sincere commitment to duty rather than through aggressive confrontation. The woman who influence the narrative most significantly is who adheres to simple truths

and act with devotion or clear-sighted purpose, often holding the real, unacknowledged power. Sushie with greater composure acts as a subtle, guiding force to Padmalochan. She is even rectifying force against his destructive trajectories. The destruction of illusion occurs because the character of Sushie holds up the mirror of uncompromising truth. Das portrays her character quietly defying or transcending patriarchal limitations simply by being true to their essential nature. In the words of Mohanty "The most powerful character to emerge is Sushie, dutiful yet detached, profoundly evolved yet humble –doomed by marriage yet discovering in that situation a true blessing for her inner life. She belies Padmananda's romantic dreams, but in the process leaves his consciousness purified." (Mohanty 188)

When she is wronged or trapped by convention, her inner response is not one of self-pity or social rebellion, but a deeper resolve or an inner withdrawal that preserves her spiritual core, which acts as a powerful form of spiritual defiance against social coercion. When Sushie makes Padmalochan realise the reality of diamond episode, he accepts

"If on the one hand Jasmine's roguery terribly agitated me, on the other Sushie's unruffled calm ridiculed me. Each time I faced a crisis I felt helpless, but today I felt not only helpless but also unfit – doubly unfit –incapable of assuming any sensible stance in meeting the situation. I had neither any power to fight the appalling fraud perpetrated right before my eyes, nor the ability to retire into a psychic poise." (164)

Sushie illustrates the empowerment that arises from spiritual purity and inner strength. Her calmness amidst life's sufferings and her elevated consciousness represent an ideal of feminine spiritual empowerment. She challenges societal concept of women merely as objects of desire or emotional beings. The novel also subtly criticizes societal norms that restricts and confine women to roles of subservience and emotional dependence. Sushie silently endures her life tied to her emotionally invalid husband yet her detachment and serene acceptance illustrate a form of empowerment rooted in spiritual resilience rather than material dominance. Das through her character emphasizes that true empowerment stems from inner self-awareness and spiritual growth rather than external circumstances or societal validation. The novel suggests that women's empowerment is fundamentally linked to self-realization. Sushie's spiritual insight and calm demeanor reflect an internal freedom that does not rely on societal status but on

inner spiritual harmony. This aligns with the broader philosophical framework of Das, who advocates that human consciousness and spiritual evolution are the ultimate sources of empowerment.

Two other women characters of importance that cast a lasting influence on the protagonist are Ranjita Devi and his own foster grandmother. Ranjita Devi is a powerful woman, "Her photographs appeared in newspapers and bulletins, doling out charity or presiding over a satsang or cow welfare meetings or multifaith prayer assemblies. She was Ranjita Khokar. Though wedded to Thakore, she had retained her maiden surname" Her cunning husband also fears her. Her faith in Padmalochan transforms him into genuine swami Padmananda. H.P.Shukla in his article 'In Search of Nation's Self: A Reading of *The Escapist*' writes "A power becomes operational in Ranjita Devi that changes forever a groping Padmananda" (200)

In novel the *Escapist*, like his other works women's quest for self is not a purely materialistic or social pursuit but a metaphysical one. The truly empowered women in his works are those who have successfully controlled the chaotic, ego-driven impulses. Their self-discovery is a realization of their moral clarity, innate strength, and intuitive connection to a higher truth. According to traditional feminist thought on surface his women characters are not successful one. But these women display evolutionary maturity and demonstrate that the most profound and unshakeable liberation is achieved in the consciousness. Their experience allows them to exert a serene and unshakable influence on the world around them. In conclusion, *The Escapist* portrays women as vital agents in the journey towards self-awareness and spiritual empowerment. Their inner strength, serenity, and divine wisdom serve as sources of inspiration, highlighting the importance of inner growth for genuine empowerment. Das's narrative testifies that self-empowerment for women can be a spiritual quest that leads to liberation from societal illusions and personal bondage.

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